

The global climate of land politics

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ABSTRACT


Land is a key input in economic production and production-waste sink. This links land to the causes of and responses to climate change. The dominant climate action ideas are based on the concept of ‘land tenure security’ which, in a global context marked by land-based inequities, means ratifying what already exists. This reinforces undemocratic social structures and institutions that themselves contribute to climate change. A restructuring of global land politics is called for, without which any analyses of and responses to climate change are at best superficial, and at worst, flawed and self-defeating. What is needed is to acknowledge the pervasive land-based social inequities in the world, and to end such inequities by pursuing a redistribution of a range of access to a range of land and resources in ways that categorically benefit the working people.

KEYWORDS

Climate change politics; land politics; land tenure security; redistributive land policy; IPCC

1. Introduction

Land is a key input in economic production and a dump or sink for the waste generated by production. It is directly associated with the causes of and responses to climate change, a substantial part of which is linked to agriculture and food, thereby implicating rural land politics. But the nature of the link between climate change and land is not uncontested. For example, a neoliberal notion of land as input in production and a sink for waste (World Bank, 2007) is fundamentally different from agroecology’s perspective (Rosset & Altieri, 2017). Past reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) touched on this issue, but generally focused on the biophysical aspect of the relationship. However, the 2019 IPCC special report, *Climate Change and Land*, broke new ground (IPCC, 2019). This report covers a wide range of themes, from biophysical to land tenure issues, and has bravely flagged the subject of global land grabs. This in itself is a huge accomplishment. But with this achievement come pitfalls. The report embraces ‘land tenure security’ as its principal framework for land-based climate change mitigation and adaptation, but it remains silent on what this actually means for land-based social relations in today’s socially differentiated societies. This is a major Achilles’ heel inasmuch as ‘securing’ land tenure in the context of high inequality is likely to become an exercise in ratifying what already exists, that is, interpreting and implementing the framework in a way that reinforces undemocratic social structures and institutions that also happen to significantly contribute to climate change.

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Building consensus at the centre may be worthwhile under certain conditions. But a major problem today lies in the tendency of such a strategy to incorporate contested concepts by emptying them of class analysis and definition (Arsel, 2019). Class – along with co-constitutive social identities, especially gender, race/ethnicity, generation and religion – intersect and influence the causes, conditions and consequences of climate change and political responses to the climate crisis we are now facing. Without class analysis, how can one understand how climate change shapes – and is shaped by – decisions about who should control land, how much, where and for what purposes, and who must lose, or be denied, access? If our assumption is that land-based inequalities must be addressed, then it is ‘redistributive land policy’ – *not* ‘land tenure security’ – that becomes urgent and necessary. In societies marked by land-based inequities, land tenure security in the form of formalization of land claims *without* redistributive and restitutive content is likely to legitimize and reinforce inequities. Land tenure security through formalization of land claims per se is not problematical because it can result to real benefits for working poor people, but where this occurred in the absence of accompanying redistributive and restitutive policies the outcomes tend to be ad hoc and limited, and sometimes essentially a counter-reform. Inherently a class-relational approach, social justice-oriented redistributive land policy requires an understanding of the underlying class character and direction of the flow of change in social relations. Gaining land access or suffering land dispossession are not random or neutral social processes, unmarked by purposive political action and theories of social change. *In short, redistributive land policies necessarily include a component of land tenure security in the form of formalization of land claims and land titling, but stand-alone ‘land tenure security’ through formalization of land claim or land titling on its own does not necessarily and always have redistributive and restitutive substance.*

In the current context, the ‘land tenure security’ framing in the IPCC report is likely to be interpreted and implemented in a way that reinforces the very structures and institutions in land politics that contribute to climate change, such as capitalist intrusion into land frontiers resulting in forest clearing, and capitalist industrial and fossil energy-based monocrop plantations (Liao et al., 2021; Peluso & Lund, 2011; Rasmussen & Lund, 2018). Generalized conditions of precarious or non-existent land access, caused by capitalist market relations or extra-economic coercion, wars or disasters, make social justice-oriented redistributive land policies difficult yet unavoidable requirements for addressing climate change.

In the course of the twentieth century, far-reaching redistributive land policies were carried out across the world based on specific economic imperatives (Akram-Lodhi et al., 2007; de Janvry, 1981; Griffin et al., 2002; Kay, 2002a; Thiesenhusen, 1989), on political arguments such as ending violence (Fajardo, 2014; Kay, 2001), or to further democratization (Fox, 1990). These arguments remain urgent and relevant today, but have less political force despite the pressing need for such policies. A social justice-oriented strategy for combating climate change could be a powerful argument in support of redistributive land policies, but the current dominant narrative points in the opposite direction, undermining broad-based, genuinely democratic land policies.

This paper takes a critical look at the relationship between land and climate change politics partly by examining the 2019 IPCC land report. A basic assumption we have is that whether or not some rural people become vulnerable to climate change depends in part on their location in the spheres of production and social reproduction; and in the rural areas, access to land can be a decisive factor, where some may prosper while most others suffer pauperization amid severe climatic disruptions (see, e.g. Watts, 1983/2013). Access to land – that is, social relations and politics of land – is thus key in thinking about how to address climate change from a social justice perspective especially because a significant part of climate mitigation and adaptation ideas and actions require maintaining or reordering access to natural resources (land, forest, water). We argue that problems

in access to land (lack of, diminished, or precarious access) are the dominant defining feature of contemporary rural land politics in the world, and this problem is exacerbated by climate actions that do not address the land question from a redistributive justice perspective. Prior and/or accompanying democratization of access to land are key to climate justice, but the current global climate in land policy is overwhelmingly against redistributive approaches. Policy perspectives that do not specify what they mean by ‘land tenure security’ are likely to be interpreted within the dominant non-redistributive framework, and are thus dangerous for rural working people. We construct our argument by mapping, historicizing and typologizing key currents in mainstream political stance on land policies, and what these imply for climate actions.

2. Land and climate change politics

There are three conceptual building blocks that, together, serve as the spine of our argument. First, the term ‘land politics’ is used here to refer to the land-based social relations between social classes and groups within society, and between the state and society, that are structured by formal and informal, state and non-state rules, procedures or norms, and the degrees of autonomy and capacity of actors to understand their situation and take actions to maintain or change it. State land policies are thus a small fraction of land politics; institutions through which working people access land are diverse: state and non-state, formal and informal, and the degree of autonomy and capacity of access land and derive benefit from it varies based on class, ethnicity, gender and generation (Ribot & Peluso, 2003). In land politics the concept of ‘land tenure security’ is highly contested: whose tenure and whose security, tenure security for what end? For example, the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VFV) Land Management Law of Myanmar calls for ordinary villagers to formally register their land claims purportedly to provide land tenure security. There are two less publicly spoken about implications of this process: (a) villagers who engage in shifting agriculture are unlikely to get registration for his/her full range of land, and at best, may get a small parcel suitable only for sedentary farming; (b) all lands that are not or cannot be claimed by the villagers are then claimed by the state, deemed as virgin, fallow and vacant land, and are then reallocated to corporate investors; or that, only the remaining lands after corporate investors took over vast tracts of lands were then opened up to land registration for ordinary villagers. So, the question is: whose tenure is it that was secured in this process? Land grabbing in Myanmar has been carried out through this legal mechanism loosely billed as a ‘land tenure security’ instrument by the government, and in contrast, labelled by autonomous civil society groups as the ‘land grabbing law’ (Franco & Borrás, 2019; Ra et al., 2021).

Second, our paper is not about climate change per se; rather, it is about the politics of climate change. Building on earlier work (Borrás et al., 2020, p. 2), we define climate change *politics* as:

the dynamics operating in the spheres of social structures, institutions and political agency – namely, social relations; policies, treaties, laws, procedures, norms; projects, programs, narratives, ideas, advocacies, mobilizations and social movements, memories, rumors, or gossip – separately and collectively, among and between different social classes and groups within the state and in society that set and shape the meanings of climate change, its causes and consequences, how it can be addressed, by whom, where and when.

The definition separates, but at the same time binds together, politics and policies or projects – categories that are often muddled in the literature. Formally constituted and recognized climate change policies or projects are one of the components of climate change politics – the same relationship that land policies have to land politics. Labelled as climate change mitigation or adaptation measures, such policies and projects include ‘Bio-energy with Carbon Capture and Storage’

(BECCS) as well as officially recognized big forest conservation projects and REDD+ (Corbera, 2012). But as many scholars working from political economy and political ecology perspectives (e.g. Paprocki, 2019) remind us these are not the only things that matter. Social relations of production and ecological and political conditions of nature (land, water, forest) could be significantly altered not only by climate change (e.g. droughts, floods) or formal climate change policies or projects, but also by wild speculations, rumours, gossip, spectacle or frenzy inspired or triggered by measures purported to address climate change. For example, many land brokers and speculators who have orchestrated the grabbing of land from ordinary villagers in diverse societies during the past decade have carried out their schemes by invoking the urgent need to address climate change through large-scale investments such as opening a plantation to cultivate feedstock for biofuel production – whether biofuel production actually takes place, is seriously planned, or is only wildly speculated (Fairhead et al., 2012; Franco & Borras, 2019; Hunsberger et al., 2017).

Looking at climate change politics means subjecting climate change mitigation and adaptation narratives and practices to a reality check. It allows for a politicized and historicized analysis of social processes, the evolution of climate change mitigation and adaptation, and social class relations, and a scrutiny of terminologies such as ‘vulnerability’ and ‘scarcity’ (following Ribot, 2014; Scoones et al., 2019). In our definition, climate change politics can be crudely categorized as progressive or regressive. By progressive climate change politics we mean ‘those social dynamics that shape the meanings of climate change, its causes and consequences, how it can be addressed, by whom, where and when in ways that advance “agrarian justice” and “climate justice”, separately and together’ (Borras et al., 2020, p. 2).¹ By regressive climate change politics we refer to ‘social and political processes that block, undermine or reverse advocacy for or gains in progressive climate change politics’ (Borras et al., 2020, p. 2).

Third, the principal accomplishment of the 2019 IPCC land report lies in putting together ground-breaking knowledge on the biophysical, agroecological, technical and management dimensions of the link between climate change and land. But the link between climate change and land is also inherently political, a reality that does not come out sufficiently clear enough in IPCC reports. For example, reduced annual rainfall in a microregion is likely to have a differential impact upon socially differentiated communities engaged in the spheres of agriculture and food production, circulation, exchange and consumption, where some are likely to lose out and become impoverished, while a handful of others may accelerate and expand capital accumulation (see e.g. Watts, 1983/2013, Ch. 7). An extreme weather disturbance might expel fisher-farmers from their land near the seashore, while a real estate and hotel conglomerate grabs their land (Uson, 2017). It is not uncommon for ordinary poor people to lose their productive assets (access to land, forest, herd, house) not because of the extreme weather disturbance itself, but because of coercion deployed by the state and powerful elites who take advantage of the disaster – what Klein (2007) calls ‘disaster capitalism’.

3. Land tenure in the IPCC land report: one step forward?

The extent to which the 2019 IPCC *Climate Change and Land* report addresses the *political dimension* of land and its link to climate change is encouraging albeit limited. The concentrated discussion on ‘land tenure’ is to be found in one section of Chapter 7, or six pages of this nearly 900-page report, with the bulk of the discussion in a tabulated format (Table 7.7). We present its highlights, not randomly, but selecting what we feel to be relevant to our discussion.

For a report of IPCC to claim that there is global ‘land grabbing’ – using this politically loaded term – demonstrates courage, and is laudable. It is probably one of the most significant elements of the report because it brings the conversation right into the very heart of global land politics. The IPCC report states:

Understanding of land tenure under climate change also has to take account of the growth in large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs), also referred to as land-grabbing, in developing countries ... Land grabs ... are often driven by direct collaboration of politicians, government officials and land agencies ... involving corruption of governmental land agencies, failure to register community land claims and illegal land uses and lack of the rule of law and enforcement in resource extraction frontiers ... The literature expresses different views on whether these acquisitions concern marginal lands or lands already in use ... Land-grabbing is associated with and may be motivated by the acquisition of rights to water, and erosion of those rights for other users (IPCC, 2019, p. 750)

In response to the requirements of climate change mitigation and adaptation that have relevance to land, and partly in recognition of global land grabs as a key context, the IPCC report summarizes its essential points on land tenure, pointing out the way forward, as follows:

Land tenure systems have implications for both adaptation and mitigation, which need to be understood within specific socio-economic and legal contexts, and may themselves be impacted by climate change and climate action (*limited evidence, high agreement*). Land policy (in a diversity of forms beyond focus on freehold title) can provide routes to land security and facilitate or constrain climate action, across cropping, rangeland, forest, fresh-water ecosystems and other systems. Large-scale land acquisitions are an important context for the relations between tenure security and climate change, but their scale, nature and implications are imperfectly understood. (IPCC, 2019, p. 677)

Insecure land tenure affects the ability of people, communities and organisations to make changes to land that can advance adaptation and mitigation (*medium confidence*). Limited recognition of customary access to land and ownership of land can result in increased vulnerability and decreased adaptive capacity (*medium confidence*). Land policies (including recognition of customary tenure, community mapping, redistribution, decentralisation, co-management, regulation of rental markets) can provide both security and flexibility response [*sic*] to climate change (*medium confidence*). (IPCC, 2019, p. 29)

The report also emphasizes the issue of indigenous peoples and customary land tenure, and the lack of formal registration of these lands, stating that, ‘Agricultural practices that include indigenous and local knowledge can contribute to overcoming the combined challenges of climate change, food security, biodiversity conservation, and combating desertification and land degradation (*high confidence*)’ (IPCC, 2019, p. 31). Furthermore: ‘around 521 million ha of forest land is estimated to be legally owned, recognised, or designated for use by indigenous and local communities as of 2017 ... In 2005 only 1% of land in Africa was legally registered’ (IPCC, 2019, p. 749). It goes on:

Much of the world’s carbon is stored in the biomass and soil on the territories of customary landowners, including indigenous people ... making securing of these land tenure regimes vital in land and climate protection. These lands are estimated to hold at least 293 GtC of carbon, of which around one-third (72 GtC) is located in areas where indigenous peoples and local communities lack formal recognition of their tenure rights. (IPCC, 2019, p. 749)

These policy assumptions and implications are broad; they are made somewhat more specific in the tabulated format (IPCC, 2019, pp. 751–752: Table 7.7), the highlights of which are as follows:

Assumption: Insecure land rights are one factor deterring adaptation and accentuating vulnerability. Specific dimensions of inequity in customary systems may act as constraints on adaptation in different

contexts. LSLAs may be associated with monoculture and other unsustainable land use practices, have negative consequences for soil degradation and disincentivize more sustainable forms of agriculture.

Implications: Secure land rights, including through customary systems, can incentivize farmers to adopt long-term climate-smart practices, e.g. planting trees in mixed cropland/forest systems. Landscape governance and resource tenure reforms at farm and community levels can facilitate and incentivize planning for landscape management and enable the integration of adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Assumption: Land tenure security can lead to improved adaptation outcomes, but land tenure policy for forests that focuses narrowly on cultivation has limited ability to reduce ecological vulnerability or enhance adaptation. Secure rights to land and forest resources can facilitate efforts to stabilize shifting cultivation and promote more sustainable resource use if appropriate technical and market support are available.

Implications: Land tenure insecurity has been identified as a key driver of deforestation and land degradation leading to loss of sinks and creating sources of greenhouse gases. While land tenure systems interact with land-based mitigation actions in complex ways, forest decentralization and community co-management have shown considerable success in slowing forest loss and contributing to carbon mitigation. Communal tenure systems may lower transaction costs for REDD+ schemes, though with risk of elite capture of payments.

Assumption: Many pastoralists in lands at risk from desertification do not have secure land tenure, and erosion of traditional communal rangeland tenure has been identified as a determinant of increasing vulnerability to drought and climate change and as a driver of dryland degradation.

Implications: Where pastoralists' traditional land use does not have legal recognition, or where pastoralists are unable to exclude others from land use, this presents significant challenges for carbon sequestration initiatives. Carbon sequestration initiatives on rangelands may require clarification and maintenance of land rights.

4. Two steps backwards: a critical analysis of the IPCC report's land tenure content

Without dismissing the significance of the IPCC report's brave treatment of land tenure issues, we offer some critical observations. First, while the report claims that land grabbing is 'imperfectly' understood (we agree), it does not offer a way to understand it better. The report simply repeats the well-known drivers of land grabs, namely, the 2007–2008 food price spike and the rush for bio-fuel production. During the last decade, there has been a 'literature rush' on land grabs (Oya, 2013) resulting in the currently huge body of work on the topic.² There is a significant cluster within this literature dedicated to 'green grabbing', i.e. land grabbing in the name of the environment (Benjaminsen & Bryceson, 2012; Fairhead et al., 2012; Ojeda, 2012). Yet, the report's engagement with the scientific literature on land grabs is thin, and there is no engagement with the cluster on 'green grabbing', even though this is the form of land grabbing which is most directly related to the relationship between climate change and land. The report's treatment of the land grabbing issue falls far short of the state of the art. How do climate change mitigation and adaptation measures result in land grabbing, and how do land grabs result in deepening the climate crisis? These questions are at the heart of the relationship between climate change and land, with emerging evidence suggesting that recent land grabs are contributing significantly to greenhouse gas emissions. For instance, Liao et al. (2021, p. 15) studied 36.7 million hectares of large-scale land deals and found that, 'clearing lands transacted between 2000 and 2016 (36.7 Mha) could have emitted ~2.26 GtC, but constraining land clearing to historical deforestation rates would reduce emissions related to large-scale land transactions to ~0.81 GtC'. But these questions are not addressed in the

IPCC report. But even the so-called ‘green solutions’ – even if these help save or reduce emissions – can lead to deeply unjust social outcomes. For example, the shift to renewable energy may, under certain conditions, entail committing larger areas of land to produce energy (at best at the same given level now), given the lower power density of renewables, such that energy production becomes a key driver of land use change under a low-carbon scenario (see Scheidel & Sorman, 2012, p. 588).³ Recent corporate plans to pursue carbon offsetting based on trees and lands are likely to combine the two dimensions of green grabbing just cited. In its estimates, Oxfam reported that: ‘Shell would need about 28.6 million hectares by 2050 ... while TotalEnergies plans to offset about 7% of its emissions, needing about 2.6 million hectares by 2050’ (Harvey, 2021, n.p.). Moreover, the report claims that ‘BP has not set out its plans in detail, but is likely to require as much as 22.5 million hectares for offsetting as much as 15% of its emissions’ (Harvey, 2021, n.p.). These all sound like Tsing’s notion of ‘economy of appearances’ (Tsing, 2000), and so, whether or not these plans materialize, their implications for recasting access to land can be palpable in the real world.

Second, the report is overly focused on the partial, fragile, or non-existent formal recognition of existing access to land as the main problem that purportedly causes land tenure insecurity, and thus can undermine climate change mitigation and adaptation, or can result in mitigation and adaptation measures having adverse impacts on local communities. For the dominant narrative, the solution is to push for the formal recognition of existing land tenure, where land tenure security is essentially taken to mean the formal recognition of pre-existing access to land. There are two problems with this. On the one hand, not all compelling issues involving land are related to lack of recognition of existing tenure. For example, there are many who are landless or land-poor who need access to land, but for whom that land access is absent, or diminished, or degraded. Their status compels them to largely rely on selling their labour power, often cheaply, in order to survive. These are the world’s ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2014), ‘working people’ (Shivji, 2017), or ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein, 2006), who number at least a billion (Davis, 2006). Moreover, by 2020 there were 50.8 million reported internally displaced peoples (IDPs), of which 45.7 million were displaced due to conflict and violence, and 5.1 million due to disasters (NRC, 2020). Formal recognition of existing land tenure is not relevant to these landless and land-poor working people, but land redistribution and restitution are urgent priorities.

On the other hand, there are working people who need land and who still have a degree of access to a range of land and resources, but whose access is under constant threat from the social forces driving global land grabs. Land tenure security through formal recognition may be relevant to them, but there are four problematical aspects of formal recognition as a strategy which need to be considered. (1) In societies marked by pre-existing land-based inequalities, formalizing land tenure *without* prior or accompanying redistributive or restitutive reforms is likely to result in the formalization of inequalities. Those who were previously differentiated out or expelled from their lands are excluded from even making claims for tenure security, because they do not have existing land tenure to secure, as in the cases of the related land policies carried out in Myanmar from 2012 to 2020 (Ra et al., 2021; Ra & Ju, 2021). (2) Formalization in the context of relatively mobile systems of production almost always means sedentarization: from shifting cultivation to sedentary farming, from mobile pastoralism to ranching, from artisanal fishing to industrial fishpond production. It is a shift from an extensive land/nature-based system to an intensive capitalized system in which very few will socio-economically survive, let alone flourish (Woods, 2020). And once mobile producers are sedentarized, what happens to the land resources freed up by the formalization process? These are almost always converted into exclusionary capital-intensive, industrial-production systems of farming, ranching or aquaculture. (3) Land claims, like laws

and policies, do not self-interpret nor self-implement (Franco, 2008). Claims are interpreted and implemented in messy political struggles within and between social classes and groups within the state and society. There is nothing inherently pro-poor in land registration and formal recognition of land tenure. The actual balance of social forces that act for or against working people's interests ultimately shapes the character and trajectory of public action on tenure recognition, and in virtually all cases, the political power of working people tends to be weaker. (4) The assumption that formal land titles shield land-dependent working people from the differentiating currents of commoditization or expulsion through extra-economic coercion is questionable. The differentiating effects of capitalist market relations or the expelling power of extra-economic coercion cut across institutional status of land claims – with or without land titles, as many previous land reform beneficiaries in different countries who later gave up their lands show (Adam, 2013; Moyo, 2011). In many settings, powerful economic forces even prefer lands with formal land titles because land deals look more legitimate; in such cases, deals are more secure, not for working people, but for corporations – as Deininger explicitly suggested (noted elsewhere in this paper).

Our third critical observation is that the IPCC report tends to idealize indigenous peoples' production systems and customary land tenure. In other words, these societies and their lands – accounting for around half a billion hectares of land globally – are assumed not only to be intact, but to be inherently democratic in political character (that is, not socially differentiated), and ecologically sustainable as sources of production inputs and as waste sinks. Yet, there is ample evidence to show that the territories claimed by indigenous peoples have been significantly transformed over time and across space, marked by social differentiation, commodification and agroecological diminution and degradation. It is not uncommon to find indigenous communities that managed to get formal certification of their land rights, only to lease these out to agribusiness corporations or mining companies. In many other cases, while indigenous peoples continue to claim a territory and the central state formally classifies it as indigenous peoples' territory, in reality it could have already been transformed, in its entirety or in part, into a plantation or commercial real estate hub. The case of Davao's Unified Bagobo-Tagabawa Tribe (UBTT) in the Philippines that got ancestral land title to their 38,000 hectares land is relevant: AgriNurture Inc. (ANI), a big agribusiness, signed a long-term lease contract a huge portion of this land for 25 years, renewable for another 25 years, to develop agricultural plantations.⁴ This is not the first time that ANI engaged in such an activity in southern Philippines. There are several mining operations in the Philippines that operate in similar ancestral lands. The study by Vidal (2004) shows how a mining company deployed the classic divide-and-conquer tactic to secure free, prior and informed consent from the indigenous community that holds an ancestral land title in order to carry out extensive mining operations inside the indigenous territory. Contemporary communities under customary land tenure are also known to be subject to dynamic social differentiation and class conflict (Peters, 2004). We are not being dismissive of the importance of indigenous peoples' production systems and customary land tenure. We believe that whatever their state of being at the current conjuncture, they must be taken seriously because indeed they have important contributions to make to a positive alternative future. What we are less convinced about is by an idealized view of these communities and spaces.

Finally, and equally important, are the deafening silences in the IPCC report. A great number of working people in the world today need a range of access to a range of land and nature. The report is silent as to whether climate change mitigation and adaptation measures require prior or accompanying equitable distribution of control over land and other resources. Moreover, the report says nothing about how to equitably *redistribute or retribute* land to working people, and how to protect

the threatened land access of working people. The term ‘redistribution’ (of land) is mentioned occasionally in the report, but with no explanation or definition. The report also mentions ‘landscape’ and ‘landscape governance’, which is a promising lead (Hunsberger et al., 2017), but again says nothing of what these might mean. The concept of ‘landscape’ is highly contested in the literature (see Mitchell, 1996), and without clarifying what it means in the IPCC report, it is likely to be subsumed by the neoliberal ‘land tenure security’ framework. We do not suggest that IPCC reports should get into prescriptive operational matters; but specifying fundamental principles that define categories and concepts could clarify perspectives and positions, especially amid competing narratives not only on land politics but on climate change (Borras et al., 2021). While it is laudable that the report notes, albeit rather weakly, the issue of emissions by monoculture plantations, it is generally silent about what kind of agriculture contributes to and aggravates climate change, and – beyond enumeration of some technical and management-related issues in farming and soil management – on what type of agriculture can help mitigate climate change. This lacuna gives the impression that agriculture as a whole is the culprit. Our starting point in this paper is that it is capitalist industrial agriculture – which is not just an agroecological and technical farming system, but a socioeconomic and political system – that contributes significantly to climate change.

5. Four political acts: roll back, contain, block, promote

The global climate of land politics is currently defined by a strong aversion to any state-driven, class-based redistributive land policies, and an ideological obsession with privatization of land rights as the main thrust, and land sales and rental markets as the main mechanism for reallocating access to and use of land. Four mutually reinforcing political acts emanating from a single social force and ideology have converged to construct and maintain the current structure of the global land politics architecture: *roll back*, *contain*, *block*, *promote*. These are wilful, orchestrated actions by social groups within the state and in society in pursuit of particular socioeconomic and political interests.

In places where there have been gains in redistributive land policies under varying regimes, either socialist or capitalist, the thrust has been to *roll back* those gains. The rollback campaign started at the onset of global neoliberalism, beginning with the partial rollback of land reforms initiated by Frei and Allende in Chile, immediately after General Pinochet seized state power through a military coup (Kay, 2002b, pp. 470–471). This rollback campaign has gained momentum since then. The dismantling of regulatory institutions in land, such as state cooperatives and collective farms, spread rapidly – if unevenly – in the 1990s (Ho & Spoor, 2006; Lahiff et al., 2007; Spoor, 2008). Institutions in land access that regulate land sales and rental markets such as land size ceiling laws, or those that actively promote community or collective arrangements, such as the *ejido* system in Mexico to prevent land concentration, have increasingly been deregulated (Akram-Lodhi et al., 2007; Zoomers & van der Haar, 2000). State support to beneficiaries of land redistribution has been withdrawn.

In addition, in situations where there were ongoing redistributive land policies, the overall mainstream strategy has been to *contain* the scope, pace and momentum of such policies. Only a handful of countries have been able to pursue progressive redistributive land policies during neoliberalism, namely, Brazil and the Philippines since 1988 (Franco, 2011; Wolford, 2010); South Africa, with different variants of a hybrid market-led/state-driven land redistribution (Cousins, 2009; Ntsebeza & Hall, 2007); Colombia (Grajales, 2015); Zimbabwe since 2000 (Moyo, 2011; Scoones et al., 2010); Mozambique’s 1997 Land Law (Negrão, 1999) and the retention of Indonesia’s Basic Agrarian Law

of 1960 through the neoliberal era. In each of these cases, the strategy deployed by mainstream political forces was to limit and contain the scope and pace of policy implementation. Outright abandonment of existing redistributive land policies may prove to be too politically risky because of possible popular protest. The strategy for containing such policies involves slowing down the speed of implementation, delimiting the scope, defunding the land agency or ministry, or rendering altogether dormant a potentially redistributive land policy – as seen, in varying contexts and extents, in the countries referenced in this paragraph.

Meanwhile, in settings with significant numbers of landless or land-poor, and thus in need of land redistribution and restitution but there are no existing appropriate policies or laws, the mainstream strategy deployed has been to *block* any land policy that is redistributive or restitutive in character. A classic example is Myanmar where the World Bank, USAID and other international agencies that were advising the government (before the February 2021 military coup) pushed for market-oriented land policies, essentially blocking the possibility of system-wide redistributive and restitutive land policies (Ra et al., 2021; Ra & Ju, 2021). The cases of Brazil, Philippines, South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Colombia, already mentioned, are among the few exceptions: no other national redistributive land policy has been passed or implemented during the neoliberal period, despite the unprecedented levels of land concentration established or maintained by neoliberalism. The Indonesian BAL of 1960 has been retained but kept dormant. Even those laws and policies that have sought to regulate the frenzied land rush of the past decade have been applied only peripherally; regulation has been used in order to facilitate large-scale land deals by minimizing collateral damage such as expulsions of affected villagers without monetary compensation. Arguably, the most pervasive form of the blocking strategy is having a ‘no policy’ policy. This refers to societies where there is a compelling case for redistributive land policies, but where governments choose not to adopt any policies to achieve this end.

These three political acts, separately and together, ultimately seek to *promote* market-friendly land policies. While neoliberal land policies are constituted, interpreted and implemented in a highly uneven manner, idealized versions take the defining features of privatized, deregulated and demand-driven land policies aimed at stimulating land sales and rental markets, joint ventures and credit markets. This can be facilitated by ensuring the availability of transparent data and information about private property in land that can in turn allow for informed transactions – by willing sellers and willing buyers – which require minimum bureaucracy and are enforceable with minimal transaction costs. The objective is to use land and nature in the most economically efficient manner (Pereira, 2021). The notions of appropriate land use and appropriate land users are defined by a mainstream concept of economic efficiency, centred around the maximization of use of scarce land resources for a free market-driven economic growth that could satisfy the profit- and utility-maximizing impulses of individuals (Deininger & Byerlee, 2011). Formal private land titles can ensure the ‘security’ necessary to facilitate dynamic land and rental markets, joint ventures and credit markets. In this context, security means, primarily, security for owners of capital – from corporate agribusiness to finance capital, from traders to rich farmers (Deininger, 2011). It is less about the security for working poor people from being discriminated against, or from being coerced to give up control of land. This is part of the dominant neoliberal narrative where ‘investment’ becomes synonymous to ‘corporate investments’, consciously or unconsciously dismissing the two other equally important (if not more important) investments, namely, public investments and investments of working poor people themselves (Kay, 2014). The guiding principle is to ensure that the most economically efficient users (in neoclassical economics/new institutional economics terms) are able to access and use land in the most economically efficient manner

– that is, the greatest profit that can be derived from economic undertaking. This might entail individual or group rights, freehold title or formalizing customary land tenure, or a combination of these; the bottom line is whether it will allow for land sales and rental markets, joint ventures and credit markets, to emerge and flourish, thereby assuring would-be capitalist investors of the security of their investments.

This is captured in the views of Klaus Deininger, author of the 2003 World Bank land policy framework (Deininger, 2003), and co-author of the World Bank's 2011 report on the global land grabs (Deininger & Byerlee, 2011). Deininger stressed the importance of enabling relevant actors to 'register group rights in a way that allows for community management of basic land administration processes (such as allocation of individual rights ...); boundaries are recorded and a clear internal governance structure ... is established to allow interaction with outsiders'. He explained that this is important 'to allow land users to enter into joint ventures with investors, or to allow groups to gradually individualize land rights if desired' (Deininger, 2011, p. 237). A key neoliberal framework on agriculture and development that is fundamentally anchored on the 2003 World Bank land policy document (see also De Soto, 2000) is the *World Development Report (WDR) 2008* (World Bank, 2007). Like its 2003 forerunner, the *WDR 2008* strategy framework synthesizes the past and frames the future in relation to what role agriculture, land and nature will have to play in economic activity. It states: 'Land markets ... can raise productivity, help households diversify their incomes, and facilitate exit from agriculture', and continues: 'land markets are needed to transfer land to the most productive users and to facilitate participation in the rural nonfarm sector and migration out of agriculture', before concluding: 'insecure property rights, poor contract enforcement, and stringent legal restrictions limit the performance of land markets, creating large inefficiencies in both land and labor reallocation' (World Bank, 2007, p. 9).⁵ The key documents referenced here all point to the question of reallocating land use to more economically efficient users (again, in the definition by neoclassical and new institutional economics) through free market-based mechanisms. The non-efficient and non-viable users have to be assisted in their exit options out of agriculture through a variety of safety net programmes, including cash transfer programmes.

The political acts of *rollback*, *containment*, *blocking* and *promoting* have resulted in the current global land politics architecture. As such, the land policy structure is an inherent component of global neoliberal capitalism where it serves at least two major roles: as a strategy to address the capitalist crisis of over-accumulation (Harvey, 2003) by using land/nature for cheap inputs in production; and, at the same time, as a strategy to address the ecological crisis of capitalist production by expanding the role of land/nature as sink for production waste (Fraser, 2021; Martinez-Alier, 2021; O'Connor, 1998). This is not an original political strategy. The *roll back*, *contain* and *block* strategies against redistributive land policies emerging out of socialist or anti-colonial revolutions or electoral victories of left-wing political parties were deployed by conservative political forces worldwide during the Cold War, from the 1950s to the beginning of neoliberalism in the early 1980s. These forces included political coalitions like the 1960s' US-driven Alliance for Progress, as well as key individuals such as Roy Prosterman and Wolf Ladejinski (Putzel, 1992). During the Cold War, the roll back–contain–block strategy fed into the strategy to promote counter and/or pre-emptive land policy reforms. These took the form of formal land titling, land resettlement or internal colonization, limited liberal redistributive land reforms, or a combination of these. This type of intervention was described by Diskin (1989), in the context of El Salvador, as reforms that prevent change. The nature of the contemporary roll back–contain–block–promote political acts is the same as that observed by Diskin decades ago.

6. The global climate of land politics

Land tenure security is central to the dominant development policy narrative and practice. Front and centre in ‘land tenure security’ frameworks is the security of capitalist investors – not that of working poor people. Yet this concept and practice are contested. How to make it socially legitimate is a challenge. Deininger is keen on striking a balance between capital accumulation and political legitimacy imperatives by way of formalizing land rights, but again, centrally in order to protect the interest of capitalist investments:

Understanding and respecting these rights is important if investments are to be socially legitimate and legally secure. Failure to do so can lead to conflict and strife that will negatively affect the economic viability of land-related investments. Failure to map and record land rights ... makes it difficult to identify boundaries and legitimate owners as a basis for engaging in mutually agreed-to land transfers. Recording rights provides outside investors with somebody to talk to, a legitimate and authorized partner to negotiate the nature of investments and compensation. (Deininger, 2011, p. 236)⁶

The principal narrative animating the global political acts of roll back, contain, block and promote is the notion that the key to addressing the economic and climate crises is to take land and nature from their current *economically inefficient* use by their economically inefficient users. The assumption is that land, when used efficiently by efficient users, can function maximally as production input and as waste sink. The push for the twin policies of deregulated markets and private property in land has been uneven across societies and over time, in part because of varying degrees of resistance to it (Deininger, 2003; World Bank, 2007). Despite such political contestations, neo-liberal forces have managed to bring the world to its current state of land politics.

In addition, and especially during the past decade, an old narrative that disparages agrarian societies has been revived and given a new impetus. According to this narrative, some agrarian systems – such as shifting agriculture and forest foraging, mobile pastoralism and artisanal fishing – are *ecologically destructive*, and thus are causing or aggravating the climate crisis.⁷ But this narrative can be politically complicated in many societies. For example, while a government may release public statements saying it respects customary land tenure arrangements, it may in practice refuse to register land claims by those practising shifting cultivation, or only register a plot that is a small fraction of the total cultivated land area, and excludes fallow land. The only way for such a small plot to be productively viable is to shift the farming system to a sedentary method. The net effect of this is the cessation of customary production systems and the abrupt shift to sedentary cultivation (in the cases of pastoralism and artisanal fishing, a shift to ranching or aquaculture), which is capital-intensive and dependent on fossil-based inputs. Another implication of this policy action is the freeing up of a large portion of land originally used in mobile production systems. This is immediately captured by the state for reallocation to more socioeconomically and politically powerful capitalist investors. This is what has been unfolding in many borderland ethnic communities in Myanmar during the past decade, for example (Ra et al., 2021; Springate-Baginski & Kamoon, 2021). Acknowledging that this process and outcome have been common practice for a long time, Deininger states: ‘many countries have considered land and associated natural resources not formally registered as property of the state, which governments could dispose of at will, often without considering the actual status of occupation’ (Deininger, 2011, pp. 236–237). He explains that this widespread practice ‘presumes any unclaimed or unregistered land to be “empty” and thus available for transfer with few safeguards. This bias can take many forms, including the recognition of rights only to land currently cultivated (i.e. excluding fallow land)’ (Deininger, 2011, p. 237).

Climate change is used by dominant actors – state and non-state, corporate and non-corporate – to revive the old claims that some agrarian systems are ecologically destructive, in order to justify the use of extra-economic coercion and radically shift the land use to capitalist production systems that they deem offer a greater degree of economic efficiency in allocative, distributive and technical terms. This is a concrete manifestation of the vital importance of understanding climate change *not only* in terms of biophysical links and in terms of projects and policies, *but equally importantly*, in terms of politics. The dominant understanding of climate change mitigation and adaptation is framed within the capitalist economic development framework of endless capital accumulation, which sees land and nature as a productive input and a waste sink. Even before Climate Smart Agriculture was popularized in the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) events, the *WDR 2008*, released in the same year as the COP Bali in 2007, had already established the framework for the relationship between land/nature and climate change mitigation and adaptation, and how the free market should govern such a relationship. The *WDR 2008* states:

Based on the polluter-pays principle, it is the responsibility of the richer countries to compensate the poor for costs of adaptation ... Developing country agriculture and deforestation are also major sources of greenhouse gas emissions: they contribute ... up to 30 percent of total emissions, more than half of which is from deforestation ... caused by agricultural encroachment (13 million hectares of annual deforestation globally). (World Bank, 2007, p. 17)

It concludes by emphasizing market-based solutions: ‘Carbon-trading schemes – especially if their coverage is extended to provide financing for avoided deforestation ... offer significant untapped potential to reduce emissions from land-use change in agriculture’ (World Bank, 2007, p. 17). It has to be pointed out, however, that in the era of financialization, corporate investments are far more transnational. It is thus problematical to talk about ‘developing country agriculture and deforestation’ as if *global* capital, that is, especially North-based capital, is not deeply involved in such transformation (Clapp & Isakson, 2018; Fairbairn, 2020; Visser et al., 2015).

The foundational position advanced by the *WDR 2008* also underpins the construction of Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA), which has been promoted as a framework for climate change mitigation and adaptation in the context of the world’s agriculture (FAO, 2013; World Bank, 2016). The World Bank defines CSA as, ‘an integrated approach to managing landscapes – cropland, livestock, forests and fisheries – that address [*sic*] the interlinked challenges of food security and climate change’.⁸ It is a three-pronged strategy aimed at achieving: increased *productivity* (to produce more food), enhanced *resilience* (to reduce vulnerability to climate change-related shocks and long-term climatic stresses), and *reduced emissions* (to lower emissions for each calorie of food produced, avoiding deforestation from agriculture and capturing carbon out of the atmosphere).⁹ There is minimal mention of land tenure in CSA. In the few places where land is mentioned, the policy strategy builds on the notion of ‘land tenure security’.

Viewed from this perspective, we see ‘land tenure security’ as essentially a formal land registration campaign that targets lands of shifting cultivators, forest foragers, pastoralists and artisanal fishers. The goal seems to be to seize the greater portion of land, water, grazing land and forests, freeing them from so-called inefficient land users and land uses, and reallocating them to efficient users and uses. Meanwhile, for the working poor people who depend on land for a livelihood, fully or partially, or for those who would choose such a livelihood but are currently outside the agrarian system, the only way to secure access to land and resources is through the market. This means in practice that their chances are almost zero, because they are the least able to participate in any land sales and rental market.

This strategic shift towards neoliberal global land politics has been facilitated by a hegemonic narrative with two interlinked aspects: the purported political *impossibility and undesirability* of state-driven, system-wide, class-based redistributive land policies, on the one hand, and the practical political feasibility and desirability of market-based, privatized, so-called demand-driven and ‘multistakeholder’ approaches, on the other hand (Herring, 2003). This narrative has led to a recasting of the unit of analysis and public action: from transforming inequitable land-based social relations into more egalitarian relations based on social justice, to formalizing institutions of private property to invigorate land markets. Some critical questions are provoked by this conservative shift: can the capitalist market relations that caused landlessness self-correct towards egalitarian land-based social relations? Will the institutions and actors that deployed extra-economic coercion that caused widespread expulsions from the land turn back and self-correct via self-imposed reparation? Not impossible but unlikely in the current conjuncture. The ‘land tenure security’ strategy seems to suggest that we just forget, forgive and formalize land dispossession caused by extra-economic coercion. In short, and to put it in polemical terms, the implication of the above is to shift public action from dismantling land-based inequality to formalizing inequality.

The hegemonic narrative of land tenure security has been operationalized in part through the mantra of ‘what is do-able’ – that is, do-able within a given balance of social forces within the state and in society for or against redistributive land policy – and no longer daring to think about ‘what is possible’, which necessarily includes the need to disrupt the balance of social forces. This means that redistributive land policy has been eschewed, while what is perceived to be politically harmless and economically desirable ‘land tenure security’ is celebrated and pursued. It also means the diminution of land politics: from redistributive land policies for class-based reforms for system change, to land tenure security for project-based social entrepreneurship for economic growth. The shift has stripped transformative land policy of its inherently irreverent and subversive political character, and has reduced policy to a tamed multistakeholder process aimed at finding a consensus at the centre (Li, 2021; McKeon, 2017). It is a shift from the class-relational zero-sum political process, into a positive-sum idea – firmly within the questionable win-win formula of *WDR 2008* (Oya, 2009), and the problematical win-win formula of the concept of ‘responsible agriculture investment’ in response to land grabs (De Schutter, 2011).

Governmental funds have been raised and channelled by, through and for inter-governmental development organizations, bilateral and multilateral agencies, big philanthropic organizations, academic research institutions, and thousands of NGOs worldwide that in turn generated further narratives supporting, directly and indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, this policy shift.¹⁰ It is part of a broader politics of knowledge around climate change that has been shaped over time. Nightingale et al. (2020, p. 347) emphasize ‘how the current framing of global climate change and the scientific-policy apparatus built to tackle it limit our imagination and narrow the range of potential responses’. They elaborate:

Together, they have influenced the expertise that is brought to bear, the questions that can be asked, the people assumed to need assistance, versus those with important knowledge to govern change, and the scales at which responses should be organized. (Nightingale et al. 2020, p. 347)

The fixation on what is ‘do-able’ has led to petty reforms in land politics. The rise of a global complex of state and non-state actors that have inserted themselves into the political acts of rollback, containment, blocking and promoting of land politics, and the apparent consensus among the dominant socioeconomic classes, together form a historic bloc, the main political force that has transformed what might 40 years ago have been a laughable definition of land tenure security

into the current hegemonic narrative that is made authoritative in society by consent and coercion. Thus, petty reforms eventually attain an ideological structure and become ‘petty reformism’: small reforms that are purposively not meant to be ratcheted up into higher and more radical transformation.¹¹ It is within this tradition that the concept and practice of ‘land tenure security’ have emerged, been sustained, and received a boost from the mainstream idea and practice of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

7. Conclusion and implications: changing the global climate of land politics

The scholarly literature on the politics of land (access and control, distribution, redistribution, restitution, recognition) is extensive, rich and diverse, historically and at present. Yet, we seldom see any serious and significant engagement with this set of literature in the rapidly expanding research on the politics of climate change, even those subsets of the latter that directly relate to the issue of land. One outcome of this is that the climate change scholarship misses some of the enduring puzzles and questions in relation to the politics of land control that should be made front and centre of any land-based mitigation and adaptation actions. In this regard, we pointed out some of the contentious issues in the relationship between climate change and land.

One assumption we have in our paper is that the location of rural working people in the spheres of production and social reproduction shapes one’s position in relation to climate change (that is, whether one becomes vulnerable or not, and if so, to what extent is their vulnerability, and so on) amid climate change. In the rural areas, access to land can be a decisive factor in this context where, as Watts (1983/2013) demonstrated in the case of Northern Nigeria, some prosper while others are differentiated out in times of severe climatic disruptions largely due to pre-existing structural condition and land access is key to this. The problem today is that current state of global land access is marked by widespread landlessness and near-landlessness of many rural working people, and precarious access by those who still have some land access. It is a highly uneven, inequalitarian distribution of land access, and many of the mainstream climate actions exacerbate this further. In turn, policies that promote land tenure security can only have democratic content if and when it has the fundamental elements of redistribution, recognition and restitution (Franco & Borras, 2021), as we have demonstrated historically and through several illustrative country cases. This is key to a just transition, but the difficult challenge is that the contemporary global climate in land policy is too market-oriented, eschewing social justice-oriented redistributive approaches in land policies. This has to change.

There have been increasing calls to change the intellectual climate in scientific research and policy circles in order to reset our perspective on the causes, conditions and consequences of climate change, and the requirements and possibilities of addressing it effectively (Castree et al., 2014; Gills & Morgan, 2020; Nightingale et al., 2020). We locate our argument within these emerging critical voices. While ‘land politics’ is a narrow theme, it nevertheless acts as a lynchpin in the actual world of agriculture and food, so that the essence of our argument has broader resonance. On the one hand, agriculture contributes *at least* 30% of the world’s total greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, significant elements within mitigation and adaptation ideas and practice are related to land and nature – as productive inputs for carbon-saving or carbon-neutral commodity production systems and as a sink for waste (Fraser, 2016, 2021; Martinez-Alier, 2021; O’Connor, 1998). Ultimately, a huge part of the global complex of responses to climate change is linked to agriculture and food (Borras et al., 2021), and thus inherently to land.

Changing the global climate of land politics is key, and it is urgent. Without it, any analyses of and responses to climate change are at best superficial, and at worst, flawed and self-defeating – and are likely to only add to the growing list of what Gills and Morgan (2020) call ‘successful failures’. But this does not imply changing the global climate of land politics in a random way. Rather, it calls for a very specific character and direction of change: to acknowledge the pervasive land-based social inequities in the world today, and to take a position to end such inequalities by pursuing an egalitarian distribution of a range of access to a range of land and resources that explicitly benefits the working people that, in turn and ultimately, can only be made possible through structural transformation.

Notes

1. A broad definition of agrarian justice is used in this paper, that is, ‘the agenda of carrying out a sense of fairness for historically oppressed social classes and groups in agrarian societies’ (Franco & Borras, 2019, p. 197; also Borras & Franco, 2018). For a conceptual discussion of climate justice, see Harris (2016, pp. 35–36).
2. There is a wide-ranging scope in the global land grabs literature. A selection of studies includes: Alonso-Fradejas (2012), Dell’Angelo et al. (2017), Edelman et al. (2013), Hall (2011), Moreda (2017), Müller et al. (2021), Rahmato (2011), Rulli et al. (2013), White et al. (2012), Wolford et al. (2013), Xu (2019), Zoomers (2010).
3. We thank one of the peer reviewers for this important point.
4. See: <https://business.inquirer.net/316863/ancestral-lands-in-davao-to-be-planted-with-rice-corn>; downloaded 23 February 2021.
5. For critiques, see Akram-Lodhi (2008), Li (2009) and Oya (2009).
6. See O’Connor (1973) and Fox (1993, especially Ch. 2) for discussions about the two permanent but contradictory tasks of the state, namely, facilitating capital accumulation while maintaining political legitimacy.
7. This claim is contested in the scientific community. For critiques, see among others, Dressler et al. (2017), Scheidel (2019) and van Vliet et al. (2012).
8. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/climate-smart-agriculture>. Downloaded 28 March 2020.
9. For critical reflections, see Clapp et al. (2018), Newell and Taylor (2018) and Taylor (2018).
10. See, for example, discussion in Chapter 7 of Edelman and Borras (2016).
11. See Wright (2019) for an elaborated discussion on various strands of anti-capitalist struggles in the twenty-first century. See also Borras (2020) on petty reformism, especially on land issues.

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